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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 AMMAN 000535

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SUBJECT: AS NEW POLITICAL PARTY RULES LOOM, JORDANIAN
POLITICIANS MANEUVER

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Classified By: Ambassador David Hale
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[11](#). (C) Summary: In April, a new law regulating political parties will come into effect in Jordan. This law will require parties to broaden their membership in return for (still theoretical) financing, in the hope that Jordan's irrelevant political formations will become national political players. The Minister of Political Development has been trying to push Jordan's politicians towards this goal, but recognizes that the process must occur naturally if it is to take root. Parliament Speaker Abdulhadi Al-Majali is preparing to form a party, but its ideology is still vague, and there are indications that it may be merely a vehicle for his personal ambitions. A smaller bloc of young MPs is also moving in the direction of becoming a political party, yet despite its unique organizational structure it points towards a centrist, pro-government stance that may effectively duplicate Majali's efforts. Jordan's smaller parties, meanwhile, are in real trouble, and it is expected that the majority of them will simply go out of business rather than adapt to the new rules - although several are already engineering a path around the new, higher bar for party formation. The debate in Jordan today is less about which political parties will emerge from the new system, and more about whether the palace and government will allow those parties to function as relevant actors on the political scene. For now, caution is the watchword as the elite wait for signals that this round of reform is real. End Summary.

A New Law

[12](#). (SBU) In April, key provisions of a political parties reform law will come into effect (Ref A). When passed in April 2007, the law gave Jordan's boutique-sized political parties one year to come up with 500 retroactive "founding members" in five separate governorates as evidence of their ability and commitment to widening the political discourse to the national level. With that deadline looming, the government is trying to encourage political party leaders to pool their efforts. The theoretical reward for consolidation is the prospect of government financing - an idea enshrined in the law, but one for which no mechanism has yet been created and no funding has yet been allocated.

[13](#). (C) As the government tinkers with the rules of the game, Jordan's political parties are looking for guarantees that their freedoms will be respected, and that the government and regime will create political space in which they can pursue a

partisan agenda without being seen as unpatriotic or disloyal. They posit that this political space can be created through "signals" and systemic changes in the electoral law, but have their doubts that such moves are forthcoming.

The Government Sets the Scene

¶4. (C) During a courtesy call by the Ambassador, newly appointed Minister of Political Development Kamal Nasser spoke about his efforts to encourage the formation of strong, national political parties in Jordan. In doing so, Nasser outlined a chicken-and-egg problem in which the government is attempting to foster the development of political parties, while at the same time trying to distance itself from the process so those parties will be seen as credibly independent by Jordanian society. Rather than encourage individual politicians to form parties, as was done in the past, the Ministry of Political Development is trying to establish what Nasser calls the "stability, security and party culture" which he sees as a necessary precursor to the natural formation of organic political movements and parties in Jordan. Nasser asserted that he has "a green light to change the laws to allow for more freedom, and less restriction" when it comes to political party formation. That green light came from the King himself, who Nasser characterized as "leading reform" from the top down.

¶5. (C) Like many other contacts both within the government and outside of it, Nasser recognizes the urgent need for political parties in Jordan to channel the public's needs and desires. "The Jordanian government shouldn't fear parties," Nasser says. Yet Nasser also admits that both the regime and the political elite will need some persuading before the environment becomes ripe for the formation of parties that are more than personality-based machines. The government is

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looking for parties that will operate within societal red lines. Per Nasser, even with the Islamic Action Front (IAF) on the ropes, the government is worried that regime opponents will come out of the woodwork if they are given an opening. Nasser sums up the goal in one telling sentence: "We need an opposition in Jordan, but not an opposition to the King."

The National Partisan Front/National Trend

¶6. (C) In a meeting with the Ambassador, Parliament Speaker Abdulhadi Al-Majali talked about ongoing efforts to build up his nascent political movement-cum-party, which some are calling the National Partisan Front and others are calling the National Trend (Refs B and C). Over the past year, Al-Majali and his tribal supporters have held meetings around the country designed to build a popular base for the movement. Those meetings were put on hold during municipal and parliamentary elections in 2007 - the leadership of the movement recognized that the time was not right for full participation in these contests.

¶7. (C) The movement currently claims that sixty-three parliamentarians are affiliated with the National Partisan Front. The by-laws for the official formation of a parliamentary group are now finished, and the election of a twelve-member executive committee is expected soon. MP Abdullah Al-Jazi, a prominent member of the nascent bloc, said that several current ministers are either tacitly supporting the party or actively involved in its formation. (In particular, he mentioned Minister of Political Development Kemal Nasser as being "with us.") He also indicated that the party is in the process of building a grassroots organization, mainly through tribal networks.

¶8. (C) Majali and others in the bloc expect a full-blown rollout of the party in March, one month before the new

requirements on founding party members kick in. There are plans for a national conference in Amman which will officially launch the party with an expected 3,000-5,000 member base of founders, mostly drawn from East Bank tribes.

¶9. (C) Majali described the expected ideology of the National Partisan Front in vague terms. He said that the group would be "pro-government, but not on absolutely everything." While he described the goals of the party as "reformist," Majali is known as an establishment-oriented conservative figure who can be relied upon to not rock the government's boat in any significant way. If Majali's past efforts at forming a moderately conservative pro-government party are any indication, it will likely be an attempt to create a personality-based party. This was evident in his characterization of the new group as a counterweight not to a rival ideology in parliament, but to Majali's personal rivals Mamdouh Abbadi (who also tend to represent what is left of the socialist, pan-Arab movement in Jordan) and Sa'ad Srour (who can best be described as a progressive bedouin). Note: Jazi told us in confidence that there are already leadership strains within the movement, as Majali's ego clashes with that of other prominent MPs such as former Prime Minister Abdulrauf Rawabdeh. End Note.

¶10. (C) Jazi hinted that changes in Jordan's electoral law would be among the central pillars of the party platform. Majali has publicly stated that he envisions a proportional representation system in which party membership would be essentially required in order to obtain a parliamentary seat. "We'll blame ourselves if we don't do it," says Jazi, asserting that reform on that score is long overdue. He expects opposition from entrenched interests in the bureaucracy and current independent members of parliament, but says that the party will count on the support of the "many VIPs" (which include a slew of former ministers) to push the reform through. Note: Jazi suggests that a new electoral law would change the system of voting, but stops short of supporting re-apportionment within that system, which currently favors East Banker-dominated rural districts over heavily Palestinian-origin Amman. End Note.

¶11. (C) Having been at the top rung of Jordanian politics for over a decade, Majali has a long and established list of political enemies, many of whom are all too eager to point out his weaknesses. "Majali has expired," says parliamentarian Mohammed Kharabsheh. Deputy Speaker (and long-time Majali rival) Mamdouh Abbadi calls the new attempt at a party "more of the same." Musa Ma'aytah, a leader of one of Jordan's small parties, predicts that Majali's group (which he calls "an official project") may be able to fold into itself only one or two parties faced with closure.

¶12. (C) Fares Braizat, Deputy Director of the Center for AMMAN 00000535 003.2 OF 006

Strategic Studies at Jordan University, says that Al-Majali is "excellent at building ad hoc alliances" for certain issues and pieces of legislation, but doubts that those alliances will coalesce into a genuine political party structure. Hashem Qashou of the small Al-Resalah Party agrees, saying that the group is "more of a movement than a party." He adds that "this movement has only one goal - to elect Abdulhadi Majali Prime Minister. After that, it will dissolve. It has no platform." Others point to a de facto glass ceiling on the ambitions of the Speaker, and say that his wings have been effectively clipped. "Majali will do anything to be Prime Minister," posits political activist Jamal Al-Refai. "But the King will never let that happen. He has no interest in a strong Prime Minister like Majali would be."

The National Fraternal Bloc

¶13. (C) On January 19, fifteen members of parliament formed

the National Fraternal Bloc. MP Hazem Al-Nasser, a member of the group, characterized it as a group of "young leaders" and "young professionals" drawn from a broad spectrum of interest groups and ethno-religious minorities. It includes Christians, Chechens, Circassians, and Palestinian-origin Jordanians within its ranks. Nasser Al-Qaisi, another member of the bloc, said that ten additional deputies are seeking to join the bloc, but the founding members are being careful about who they take on board. Comment: This group has the Palace's support, as the King encourages younger, more modern leaders to emerge and organize. End Comment

¶14. (C) One piece that already sets the National Fraternal Bloc apart is its organization. Each member of the bloc has pledged to pay 100-200 JD (USD 140-280) into a fund that the bloc will use to rent office space and employ a staff of consultants, technical experts, and lawyers. They are doing this for two reasons. First, the parliament provides each member with only a secretary, leaving members without the time or expertise necessary to research the issues at hand. With the support of an internal "think tank," members of the bloc will be far more informed about upcoming legislation. Second, the professional research service of the parliament is a shared resource. The new bloc wants to come up with a partisan agenda on its own, separate from the bureaucrats in parliament who tend to spread information around. Qaisi put it bluntly: "We don't want spies."

¶15. (C) Both Nasser and Qaisi indicated that the eventual goal is for the group to become a national political party, but that it will inch slowly towards that goal. "Political parties have to start in parliament," Nasser said. This is where they can build a policy base which can be used in future elections. Nasser emphasized the importance of forming blocs after the selection of the speaker and deputy speaker positions, to ensure that they are issue based rather than personality based. Ideologically, the National Fraternal Bloc will strike the same general tone of a centrist, nationalist party. Qaisi trumpets his view that the bloc "will not be easy for the government," but also talks about the practical limits of party activity in Jordan which will lead it towards an essentially moderate, pro-government path.

¶16. (C) Nasser was keen to separate the new bloc from Majali's efforts. "There is no quality in that group," he asserted. Repeating the commonly heard criticism that the National Trend is only a vehicle for Majali's leadership aspirations, Nasser said, "we are not Syria, we are not Egypt" (a reference to the faux multiparty structures in those states that serve only to whitewash the regimes' undemocratic systems). Majali's wing man Abdullah Al-Jazi, however, played down the differences, and spoke about the two groups as being two sides of the same coin. "The National Fraternal Bloc represents the rich - they are all from (the wealthy Amman district of) Abdoun. But we are all the same bloc. They will end up supporting us in votes of confidence," he opined. Qaisi actually echoed that statement, saying that the bloc was composed of MPs who could not be bought because they were already independently wealthy, but that they would pursue a similar line to Majali's bloc.

Waiting in the Wings

¶17. (C) There are several prominent personalities in parliament that have yet to declare alliance with any bloc or nascent party. Some still likely harbor leadership ambitions, and are merely waiting to see how things shake out. During a recent parliamentary session attended by

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poloffs, longtime political operative Abdulkarim Al-Dughmi was clearly throwing his political weight around. After claiming to speak for a significant bloc of parliamentarians,

Al-Dughmi brought a series of "suggestions" (read: criticisms) to the government's attention. After his speech, several other members of parliament (notably including Deputy Speaker Mamdouh Abbadi) stood up in quick succession to align themselves with Al-Dughmi's speech. Former speaker Sa'ad Srouf is another potentially major player who remains on the fence about his future plans.

The Micro-Parties

¶18. (C) Outside of parliament, a dark cloud hangs over Jordan's fractious and notoriously irrelevant political parties. (In a typical characterization of Jordan's political parties, State Minister for Media and Communications Nasser Judeh recently quipped to the Ambassador: "I can't name even ten of Jordan's thirty-four registered parties, and I'm a State Minister.") The hope was that the new law would force these factions to band together, or at the very least prompt some collective soul searching about the benefits of developing their political message.

¶19. (C) That hope is proving ill-founded so far. "Most of these parties will close their doors," predicts Jamal Al-Refai, himself a part of several (failed) political parties in the past. Over the years, he was part of several attempts which aimed to bring Jordan's political parties under one roof. All of those efforts started out strong, but ended up stumbling over the question of leadership. In the end, Refai thinks that the leaders of Jordan's supper club-sized political "movements" would rather go down with the proverbial ship than join a broad coalition and turn over their established political fiefdoms to another. Hashem Qashou (another micro-party leader) agrees, saying that he has talked to several colleagues who are planning to close their parties before the new rules kick in. He expects that only six to eight of the current thirty-four parties will remain on the scene after April.

¶20. (C) Hani Hourani, head of the Al Urdun Al Jadid ("New Jordan") Research Center, theorizes that when the dust settles, the Communists, the Ba'thists, and the parties affiliated with PLO factions will be the only survivors. Since they all have distinct ideologies and long histories in Jordan, Hourani believes that these political parties are rooted in the political/social culture regardless of their impact on formal parliamentary politics. Hourani thinks that it is healthy to have these parties ("it is part of our pluralism"), but also says that they will remain on the sidelines of parliamentary politics. "Those parties will function as they always have - to hold rallies, seminars, conferences, and the like," he said. Hourani joked that with the demise of many of the small parties, political officers from the U.S. Embassy would have to have fewer meetings. "It will be easier for you. Instead of thirty-six or thirty-seven parties, you will have seven or ten."

¶21. (C) A theory prominent among political party leaders we met with says that some parties will remain open with the help of corruption. Musa Ma'aytah, General Secretary of the Democratic Party of the Left, elaborates: "You can buy a founding member for 10 JD (USD 14). Party leaders will just add their family members, friends, and tribal associates as 'founding members' and go on as before." In a February 7 editorial written under a nom de plume, political commentator Oraib Rantawi wrote that "as April approaches, politicians are shifting the purchase of votes to the purchase of founding members." Refai cynically suggests that "if the government wants to encourage political party leaders and bribe them with money, it will probably work," yet the resulting political formation will never be organic.

¶22. (C) Still, some parties are trying to rise to the occasion. Per Hashem Qashou, his Al-Resalah Party has opened branches in Zarqa, Karak, Ma'an, Jerash, and Salt. The party has also gathered over 700 new "founding" members to submit to the Ministry of Interior. Those names are being checked through various databases for any criminal or otherwise

malicious activity, and will then be given the official stamp of approval. Qashou sees the reasoning behind the law, but grumbles that the paperwork involved is onerous. He has so far delivered eighteen boxes of paperwork to the Ministry of Interior, and expects to deliver several more by the time the process is finished.

Is It Real?

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¶23. (C) The new political parties law is one of many attempts by the government and the King to encourage (or even force) Jordan's political elite to organize into nationally relevant formations. While this round may have the truest of intentions, Jordan's political elite is approaching it with caution. According to Fares Braizat of the Center for Strategic Studies, there has been a chilling effect from previous interventions in the political system by elements of the government who are "more Catholic than the Pope" in terms of protecting the regime from perceived instability. Recent government signals and actions contravening freedom of expression (such as a recent series of decisions by the Governor of Amman to deny requests for demonstrations and other political meetings) have, according to Braizat, created a vicious circle where self-censorship effectively prevents political leaders from stepping forward.

¶24. (C) Observers of Jordan's political scene (and perhaps even the Minister of Political Development himself) realize that a vibrant, relevant political party scene cannot be conjured up - it must appear over time, and reflect an actual base of public opinion. "The King and the government are expecting a productive debate on the issues, but they will not have one unless they let the political evolution of Jordan continue naturally," Braizat says. Hashem Qashou adds that the government is judging the effectiveness of Jordan's political parties before allowing them the freedom to pursue their political aims completely.

¶25. (C) In addition to their wish for government non-intervention, political party leaders complain that the current electoral law effectively stifles any hint of their relevance - a situation compounded by the complete separation between legislature and executive (there are no MPs in the current government). They are unanimous in their opinion that the government's attempts to bring political party leaders together will only bear fruit if changes in the electoral system allow political parties to matter again. Fares Braizat says: "There is no incentive for anyone to join a political party if it can never form a government." Hashem Qashou similarly wonders, "if I achieve my goal (of forming a relevant, national political party), then what is my reward? If they form a new government, will they call me?" In his opinion piece, Oraib Rantawi mocked the artificiality of the 500 founder requirement, saying that the number of Fatah members in Israeli prisons would be enough to form ten Jordanian political parties under the new rules. Rantawi said that Jordanian society is "haunted by fear of expression" and that "Jordanians do not trust their parties."

¶26. (C) There is a sense among some of Jordan's political elite that those who currently possess political power will be reluctant to yield it to any rival formation. Party leader Musa Ma'aytah thinks that it is unrealistic to expect that Jordanian politicians will attach themselves to political parties when they can simply rely on the tribal machines that put them into office in the first place. "I don't see any reason to carry on. It is useless to work as a political party in Jordan without systemic reforms. We are just decor," he complains. Ma'aytah argues that in the mid-1990s, there were only ten political parties in Jordan, but they were just as hemmed in by tribal loyalties which the current electoral law rewards.

¶27. (C) In the end, many of our contacts question the government's (and the King's) sincerity in their efforts to promote political reform in Jordan. "There is no political will to implement reforms," says Fares Braizat. "Every ten years, they get it in their heads to force a realignment of the Jordanian political system. This is the policy of the regime." Majali's proto-party is often cited by our contacts as evidence that even the current round of reform is rigged. Majali is seen as having either covert or overt support from the King himself - something that members of the party do not deny. Despite the formation of separate blocs, Abdullah Al-Jazi says that "we are all the same team - there is no real opposition except for the Islamic Action Front." He feels sorry for those who aren't in the royally-backed loop, calling their situation "miserable."

¶28. (C) Opinions vary on whether the blame lies with the parliament, the King, or some combination of the two. Yet our contacts all agree that no political reform can occur without comprehensive action from the top to address the structural barriers to political action. (Note: The United States gets its share of the blame, as well, with some of our interlocutors questioning whether we will push the regime for reform given other strategic interests in Jordan, while simultaneously importuning us to pressure the government for faster action.) Former Prime Minister Taher Al-Masri summarized the prevailing sentiment in a February 17

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interview, in which he cited the "lack of institutional action" as the reason that political parties in Jordan are still weak and ineffective. Jordan's political party leaders yearn for an expansion of political space, but are not expecting it any time soon.
HALE